

Asthma: Easing the Wheezing



Kyle's preschool teacher notices that he often misses school because of colds. She hears a wheeze or whistling sound in his breath when he plays hard. Could he have asthma? Asthma is diagnosed in over 6% of children under the age of 5. Asthma causes the airways to swell, tighten, and fill with mucus. Asthma episodes can be life-threatening. Here are some things teachers of young children need to know.

What are the warning signs of asthma in young children?

A child is more likely to develop asthma if a family member has asthma or allergies.

Warning signs include

- frequent coughing, shortness of breath, or complaints of a tight feeling in her chest
- congestion with colds or colds that seem to last longer for him than for his siblings
- coughing or wheezing when she plays hard, laughs, or has a temper tantrum
- dark circles under his eyes

What factors might bring on an asthma episode?

Although the cause of asthma is unknown, some episodes are triggered by

- smoke, dust, or air pollution
- allergies, including those to pets, pollen, mold, grass, dust mites, and cockroaches
- strong odors such as paint fumes and perfume
- changes in temperature, particularly exposure to cold air
- exercise or strong emotions
- respiratory infections such as colds

What is the teacher's role?

If teachers suspect asthma, they can urge parents to contact their child's health care provider. For each child who has a history of asthma, teachers and caregivers can

- help the child avoid known triggers
- have an action plan prepared by the child's parents and doctor
- respond calmly to mild episodes, and use needed equipment or medications quickly

How would a teacher know if a child needs emergency help?

Call 911 if a child

- is struggling to breathe or if his skin is pulled into his neck or rib cage when he breathes
- can't walk or talk easily
- has a peak flow less than 50%, as measured by a peak flow meter
- has lips or nails that are blue or gray

Statistics are taken from (1) Akinbami, Lara J. (2006). The state of childhood asthma, United States, 1980-2005. *Advance Data from Vital and Health Statistics, 381* (<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/ad/ad381.pdf>); and (2) *Childhood Asthma Overview* (<http://www.lungusa.org/site/pp.asp?c=dvLUK9O0E&b=22782>).

For related Web resources, see "Asthma: Easing the Wheezing" at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.

The opinions, resources, and referrals provided in this Tip Sheet are intended for information purposes only and should not be considered or used as a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. We advise parents to seek the advice of a physician or other qualified health care provider with questions regarding their child's health or medical conditions.

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